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SUBJECT: BHARAT BALLOT 09: SIX MONTHS LATER, RELIGIOUS MINORITIES  
STILL NERVOUS IN MANGALORE

REF: A) CHENNAI 25, B) 08 CHENNAI 350, C) 08 CHENNAI 315, D) 08  
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11. (SBU) Summary: Nearly six months after the anti-Christian violence that drew international media attention (refs C-E), Christian groups in the seaside town of Mangalore, Karnataka are still nervous. While the media attention has died down and large-scale violence like what transpired in September 2008 has abated, Christian leaders in the town describe other incidents that they believe point towards a continuing atmosphere of religious intolerance. They condemned Karnataka's BJP government as negligent at best and possibly even complicit in the violence and harassment toward the Christian minority in the state. While acknowledging the BJP national leadership's condemnation of attacks on religious minorities, our interlocutors expressed dismay for their community should the BJP win the upcoming national elections. End Summary.

Mangalore Christians feel under pressure

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12. (SBU) Although Mangalore (350 km west of Bangalore, on Karnataka's west coast) has not experienced large-scale violence against Christians in the six months since the clashes that rocked the area in September 2008, local Christians are still nervous. During a mid-March visit to the town, Christian leaders of various denominations told us that incidents of harassment and vandalism occur with some regularity. Reverend Aloysius Paul D'Souza, the Roman Catholic Bishop of Mangalore, told us that two Christian shrines were vandalized in February, for example. He also contended the incidents received scant coverage in the media because no one was injured. He described another incident where a Church-run hospital was mobbed by several dozen people following the death of a Hindu woman and another where an ambulance from a Church-run hospital came under attack while picking up an Hindu man. A major problem, he emphasized, is that local police are reluctant and slow to follow up on complaints about these types of incidents.

13. (SBU) Pastor D. P. Menzez of the charismatic (evangelical) New Life Fellowship in Mangalore told us Mangalore had seen various levels of harassment against Christian groups in the past, but that it had become more prevalent since the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)

came to power in Karnataka following the May 2008 legislative assembly elections. He said that groups of young Hindu radicals seek out congregations -- particularly of evangelical churches who often meet in rented premises or homes -- and harass them. He also noted, however, that during the September 2008 clashes, the police actually helped his own congregation, contacting him repeatedly throughout the day to provide updates on the situation and check on the security of his fellow churchgoers.

Interchangeable radicals

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14. (SBU) Mangalore has seen a variety of violent incidents in recent months that involve groups of Hindu extremists targeting mixed-religion couples. Our interlocutors identified the perpetrators of these anti-minority incidents in the area as members of the Bajrang Dal or Sri Ram Sena, and tended to use the names of these groups interchangeably. A local reporter familiar with both groups told us that many members of these organizations actually belong to both groups, making it difficult to determine which group was actually responsible for a particular incident. The Bajrang Dal is a national organization that began as the youth wing of the Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP), a member -- along with the BJP and Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) -- of the Sangh Parivar, a loose "family" of Hindu nationalist groups. The Sri Ram Sena, however, is more of a local organization led by Prasod Muthalik, a former Bajrang Dal convenor who left that group to found the Karnataka chapter of the Shiv Sena (a Maharashtra-based group promoting a Hindu nationalist agenda) in 2005. The current head of Mangalore's VHP chapter, M.B. Puranik, told us that Muthalik was a "renegade."

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(It is not clear if Muthalik is still with the Shiv Sena or not. We had a meeting scheduled in Mangalore with a lawyer representing the Sri Ram Sena to discuss the group's views, but he stopped answering our phone calls.)

Hindu extremists attempting to segregate communities

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15. (SBU) A local reporter for a major Indian daily told us that many bus drivers in the area sympathize with the radical Hindu groups, and alert them when they find mixed-religion couples on their buses. Groups of thugs then board the buses and harass or assault the couples. In one case that received national media coverage in February, a group dragged a young male Muslim and female Hindu off a bus near Mangalore, assaulting them both and holding the male for several hours.

16. (SBU) In another case, a 14-year-old girl from Mangalore committed suicide after being taken to a police station by a group of Hindu radicals who found her and a friend on a bus with a Muslim man. Both Christian and Muslim interlocutors told us that these headline-grabbing incidents are only the tip of the iceberg, and that such incidents occur often, only attracting press attention when the incident involves a noteworthy personality or a particularly egregious act of violence. (In the February bus incident, for example, the female victim was the daughter of a member of Kerala's legislative assembly.)

Karnataka's BJP government: part of the problem?

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17. (SBU) Our contacts laid varying degrees of blame for these incidents on Karnataka's current government. Both the Bishop of Mangalore and the Principal of St. Aloysius College blamed the state's BJP government directly for the problem, particularly stressing the complicity of the police. The Principal told us of an incident following the church attacks in which the VHP called for a general strike ("bandh"), requiring all schools and businesses to close. The Rector did not want to close the college, but feared reprisals, and requested police protection. He said that the police refused to send officers to the college, telling him "they had orders not to intervene." A professor at the college, echoing sentiments we heard from other religious minorities in Mangalore, told us that he believed many in the government (and particularly

within the police) have "a fascist mindset."

¶8. (SBU) The Bishop's public relations officer argued that the government's different approaches to Hindus and Christians who broke the law during September's violence illustrated the government's biases. He said that the Hindu extremists (and police officers) who actually attacked people at the churches and damaged property were charged -- if at all -- under minor sections of the law carrying only mild penalties. Most of those arrested, he said, were released within hours. The arrested Christians, however, who blockaded roads and threw rocks at the police, were charged under more serious provisions of the Indian Penal Code, which could lead to far longer prison sentences and fewer opportunities for pre-trial bail.

Reaping what is sown?

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¶9. (SBU) Other interlocutors blamed government passivity or political machinations, and mentioned that Hindu vigilante groups may believe that having a BJP government gives them significant freedom to pursue their goals, at least up to a point. A Bangalore-based journalist for a national daily told us he believed the violent episodes were orchestrated for political purposes, to drum up enthusiasm among the BJP's core supporters. Other local journalists said the government's other priorities made it reluctant to bother itself with Hindu vigilantes and their activities. A Bangalore editor of one of India's major dailies told us, however,

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the state government was growing increasingly concerned about these groups. He said that Chief Minister Yeddiyurappa told him that vigilante groups like the Sri Ram Sena were "little Frankensteins."

Mangalore's volatile mix

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¶10. (SBU) Our interlocutors generally agreed that a combination of factors in Mangalore made for a particularly volatile set of circumstances. First, religious minorities make up a far larger proportion of the population than in most other parts of India. The Christians we spoke with estimated that their community comprises some 20 percent of Mangalore's population, compared with just over 2 percent in India as a whole. More than 10 percent of the population is Muslim. This, a political science professor told us, ensures that these groups are not only visible, but that they can be presented as a numerical threat by Hindu vigilantes.

¶11. (SBU) The second important factor is that these religious minorities are more likely than Hindus to have had at least one family member work abroad, bringing or sending home remittances that allow their families to have what amounts to a conspicuously prosperous existence by local standards. For example, many Muslims from India's southwest coast take jobs in Middle East countries. This trend, we heard repeatedly, has been particularly noticeable in the last ten years and has created resentment among some Hindus toward these religious minorities. When discussing the Sri Ram Sena's January 24 attack on a Mangalore pub (ref A), a Mangalore hotel manager told us that the pub had been open only for a couple of weeks, and was very upscale. He speculated that some of the attackers were undoubtedly fueled by jealousy, and their inability to have the kind of money that allowed one to "buy drinks for girls at nice bars."

¶12. (SBU) A third factor, applicable mainly only to Christians, is that the area has many different types of charismatic (evangelical) churches that are aggressively proselytizing, an activity seen as particularly offensive by many observant Hindus. (We will report more on this phenomenon septel.) Pastor Menzez told us that Mangalore has no fewer than 25 evangelical churches. Although he stressed that they are all independent, he noted that many Hindus tend to refer to all of them as "New Life" congregations. These congregations, we heard repeatedly, are relatively new and are generally seen as more foreign to Indian culture than the more established Roman Catholic, Church of South India, and Syrian Orthodox churches.

Nervous about upcoming elections

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¶13. (SBU) Our Christian interlocutors uniformly expressed their nervousness about the possibility of a BJP government coming to power in New Delhi as a result of the upcoming elections. As one top church official put it, "if the BJP comes to power in the national elections, we're done for." Others expressed their anxiety with less hyperbole, noting that the national-level BJP leadership consisted of far more capable administrators and politicians than Karnataka's BJP cohort. They noted especially that Karnataka's BJP leaders failed to react quickly or effectively to denounce either the September church attacks or the pub attack, while the party's national leadership was quick to criticize both incidents. They also emphasized that the state-level BJP leadership has a very parochial outlook and was unable to comprehend the international opprobrium heaped upon it in the wake of the church attacks.

¶14. (SBU) This nervousness has galvanized the Christian community, and church leaders are doing their utmost to encourage their flocks to make their votes count on election day. Bishop D'Souza told us that he had sent a letter to all churches in his parish to get its members to register with the election commission to ensure that they can vote in the elections.

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Comment

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¶15. (SBU) While some of the tension between religious communities in Mangalore may be an inevitable mix of demographics, economics, and even the clash between modernization and tradition, there is also the unmistakable whiff of politics in the air. Attacks on religious minorities may bring international condemnation, but they are also a tried-and-true method for firing up political support in some quarters. Groups with strong pro-Hindutva agendas feel increasingly comfortable operating in Karnataka since the BJP was elected to power in the state's government. This makes many of the state's religious minorities nervous about the prospects of a BJP-led government coming to power in New Delhi. Although previous BJP-led governments did not have any obvious ill effects on Mangalore's Christians, they have not faced a situation before where both their state and national governments are BJP-led. Their misgivings about Karnataka's current BJP government only enhance their anxiety about a prospective BJP-led regime at the center. However, our contacts in the BJP's national leadership have told us that ensuring the security and prosperity of Karnataka is critical for the party because the state is the first BJP-ruled government in South India, making it important to the BJP's strategy of expanding its political base further in the South.

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